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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000147

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SUBJECT: DISILLUSIONED INSIDERS LOOK TO U.S. AS ELECTIONS
LOOM

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Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Algerian political insiders have praised the Obama administration's message of change and told us that change is on Algeria's political horizon as well, despite the likelihood that Bouteflika will be re-elected to a third term on April 9. In meetings between January 31 and February 2, several political observers told the Ambassador that the lack of credible candidates to compete with Bouteflika in the upcoming election and the alarming isolation of Algeria's youth demonstrate that Algeria's political system is broken and the need for a dialogue between the people and the government is reaching a turning point. Our interlocutors, who have political resumes stretching back to the Boumediene era, welcomed the Obama administration's early priority attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but urged that the USG consult broadly, including with the Maghreb, because "you will need the whole Arab world." END SUMMARY.

THE OBAMA BOUNCE

12. (C) In meetings with the Ambassador between January 31 and February 2, several prominent Algerian politicians shared their enthusiasm for the Obama administration and stressed the importance of Algeria's relationship with the United States. The meetings took place against the backdrop of the recent scandal involving rape allegations against an Embassy official. All of our interlocutors stated that the new administration starts out with a store of good will that it can deploy to advantage. During a January 31 meeting with the Ambassador, Ali Mabroukine, a former cabinet official in President Liamine Zeroual's administration, told us that "for the first time in a long time" the U.S. is in a good position to be heard by the Algerian government. In a statement that echoed the sentiments we heard in meetings with Senator Mohamed Amimour and former Prime Minister Smail Hamdani -- politicians with ties to Bouteflika and Zeroual -- Mabroukine said that President Obama's election represents the change that is sweeping across the world, "and Algeria can't stay on the sidelines." Hamdani said Bouteflika understands that his legacy will depend on his ability to usher in change that decentralizes decisionmaking and broadens political participation.

"YOU NEED THE WHOLE ARAB WORLD, AND ALGERIA CAN HELP"

13. (C) Separately, Amimour and Hamdani both shared their thoughts with the Ambassador on the importance of leveraging U.S. "capital" to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the status of Western Sahara. Amimour told the Ambassador that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the key

to unlocking opportunities in the region, including the bilateral relationship with Algeria. "Right now the United States has the opportunity to play an important role," Amimour stressed. The Obama Administration's immediate engagement of the issue and the appointment of George Mitchell as Special Envoy were positive signs, he said. But Amimour felt that the U.S. got off on the wrong foot with Mitchell's first visit to the region, arguing that it reflected an old-think approach to the problem that has failed in the past and would not yield results. He added, "The decision not to go to Turkey was a mistake." Amimour said it was critical for the future success of U.S. efforts that the U.S. not appear to peoples of the region as constricted by Israeli preferences. Amimour stressed that the U.S. should consult broadly, including with the Maghreb countries, because "you will need the whole Arab world." "There needs to be a new approach," he said, "and Algeria could help."

¶4. (C) Hamdani suggested the U.S. should focus on stabilizing the situation in the aftermath of Gaza and introduce confidence-building measures: "A sterile discussion focused only on disarming Hamas won't work; you need to get to the fundamentals that underpin the concerns of both sides." Hamdani added, "the United States needs to help Israel see its long-term interest in peace, which lies beyond the military objectives of today."

WESTERN SAHARA BLOCKS REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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¶5. (C) Hamdani and Amimour commented that Western Sahara was another obstacle that, if resolved, could open the door to improved cooperation in the Maghreb region and help expand bilateral relations. They both viewed Western Sahara's importance as second only to the Israeli-Palstinian conflict and suggested that the new U.S. administration represented an opportunity to reinvigorate this issue as well. Hamdani said that Morocco and the Sahrawi needed to negotiate directly. Algeria was an interested party, he noted, but not a direct party in the negotiations. Hamdani emphasized that the talks have to return to the principle of self-determination, as "the only way to put to rest the territory's colonial legacy." He added that the unresolved Western Sahara conflict is responsible for blocking the Eizenstat initiative for greater Maghreb economic integration and cooperation. Amimour also stressed the importance of getting the two sides to talk to each other and suggested that a referendum would not automatically result in a vote for autonomy. "We need to give both sides some space to explore solutions; you might be surprised by what's possible."

CHANGE WE NEED

¶6. (C) Hamdani and Amimour used the example of the U.S. elections as a way to discuss Algeria's own need for change. Both men described a political system that is increasingly top-heavy and at risk of collapsing if nothing is done to expand participation in politics and strengthen government institutions. The Ambassador shared his impression that Algerian youth were becoming increasingly isolated from Algeria's political and social mainstream, to which Hamdani responded bluntly that the problem was that Algeria's political system "has reached a dead end, where everything depends on one person." Hamdani went on to stress that democracy "is built on institutions, not one man." Hamdani explained that since Zeroual's election in 1995 the political process has steadily become more centralized and less representative. While he insisted that Bouteflika's election in 1999 did represent the will of the people, subsequent elections have revealed the system's weaknesses. "Today the situation is at its worst," he remarked. Amimour stated similar concerns, noting that "the process is not

participatory; more people need to be included in decision making." He regretted the inability of political parties to attract young people to politics and pointed out that most young, educated Algerians preferred to take their chances emigrating to Europe, rather than invest in a future in Algeria.

¶7. (C) The lack of credible candidates for the April elections and the popular assumption that Bouteflika's win is guaranteed illustrates the systemic weaknesses in Algerian politics. Hamdani explained that he was neither a supporter nor an opponent of President Bouteflika. "Bouteflika is a good friend," he said. "I told him that I did not agree with changing the constitution. I said the constitution needs to be left alone, it needs time. You can't tailor the constitution to fit like a suit." Hamdani said the government now faces the problem of maintaining credibility in the eyes of the people. There is fear in the government that as a result people will not participate in April, he added. Hamdani said that Bouteflika knows this, and is not happy with the situation.

¶8. (C) Despite his misgivings about revising the constitution, Hamdani commented that it has now been done and predicted that Bouteflika would remain for a third term. Hamdani said Bouteflika wants to be memorialized and was concerned about his legacy (reftel). He concluded by saying that if the president wants to secure his place in history, he needs to change the system. Turning to the Ambassador, he concluded that Bouteflika "can do it, if he wants. But someone needs to tell him."

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Noteworthy in these discussions was what was not discussed: the recent scandal over alleged sexual misconduct by an Embassy officer. All three men began their meetings with a warm welcome for the new U.S. Administration.

Each expressed hope that the Obama Administration would at long last register progress on problems that have long bedeviled development in both the Middle East and North Africa - i.e., the Arab-Israeli and Western Sahara conflicts.

Just as clearly, they signaled the hope that a fresh and inclusive U.S. approach to the peace process would not exclude the Maghreb. On the domestic front, they were

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unanimous about the need for political change in Algeria. Unfortunately, however, most people here are so cynical about the political system, Bouteflika's iron grip, and the entrenched interests of the various powers that be, that they despair of change and do not much care about the upcoming elections. Therefore, participation in the April 9 elections will likely be low. Faced with such a barren political landscape at home, it is perhaps not surprising that Algerians would look with hope and anticipation to their future interactions with a U.S. Administration that has become a symbol of change.

PEARCE